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Crosby's Column

Conformity Rules

By John Crosby

WASHINGTON.

Talking about the decline of debate, of disagreement in government, Sen. Eugene McCarthy observes dryly that it's getting increasingly fashionable to ask for a roll call immediately to see whether you have or haven't got the votes. "It's a little like the rules of professional basketball. You have to shoot in 24 seconds or you lose possession of the ball."

The whole idea of debate is to change somebody's mind or just possibly to make it up for him. But politics is now being run on the assumption that people's minds are already made up and unchangeable. This applies not only to legislation but to getting elected in the first place. Practically nobody runs for office any more without taking a poll to see if he can be elected, which more or less assumes that the campaign has not much purpose.

"Even if you make an issue, you don't get through to the public," Sen. McCarthy points out. "Congressmen begin to wilt under organized letter-writing campaigns. If you had some oratory, you might change their minds. Modern communications discourage debate. The one big statement gets much more attention. The Presidential press conference gets more press coverage than a whole week of what happens on the Senate floor."

Congress has shrunk in importance and the role of the White House has grown correspondingly. This of course, has not ended disagreement; it has just changed its address. More importantly it has changed the nature and the quality of the disagreement. Now, the Majority Leader and Minority Leader breakfast at the White House and, as they say, iron out their differences. But this kind of private ironing out—a mixture of political horse-trading and expediency—is far different from the kind of disagreement that occurs in public debate. When debate moves out of sight, a good deal of high principle, without which the country can't be decently governed, is lost.

Sen. McCarthy feels that four or five issues needed debate and didn't get it or aren't getting it. Among the neglected issues he lists nuclear

be head of the CIA, reapportionment, and aid

testing, the appointment of John McCone to education. "Church and State—we haven't faced up to it," he says. "Or take the invasion of Cuba. Who's to decide the invasion of Cuba? A bigger action than the Monroe Doctrine." The decision to invade Cuba was, of course, not debated before it happened but the responsibility for this decision was not debated after the disaster, either.

Rep. John Lindsay, Republican, of New York, who just got back from England, points out that this could not happen in Parliament. "Every time a Government spokesman opens his mouth in Parliament he's subject to immediate challenge. Of course, you get arguments in Committee but the trouble with the Committee system is that it's terribly formal, and you're subject to the whims of the chairman.

"I don't think the Kennedys tell us enough. I don't think Congress takes on itself the examination of what happens. In some places, the debate is terribly inadequate. No real examination of the guts of the thing. Sometimes it's embarrassing how little we know. I think the press is partly to blame. I have seen occasions where there has been first-class professional debate but the press has dealt almost exclusively in conclusions."

Orthodoxy and conformity are the rule of the day and this, I find, lamentable. The splinter parties once provided a fresh breeze of unorthodoxy and dissent that required, if nothing else, the two major parties to stand up and defend themselves. The old-time mavericks like the late Sen. William Langer or even full-blown radicals like Rep. Vito Marcantonio provided a very real germinal function to Congressional thought. But there are no splinter-party Congressmen any more.

There are few real mavericks in either house with vigorous independent dissenting opinion. Those few—people like Sen. William Proxmire or Rep. Henry Reuss, both from President Kennedy's least favorite state of Wisconsin, can fulminate all day on the floor of Congress without getting a stick of type in the nation's press.

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